

Ski by day and party at night

Located between Wanaka and Queenstown in New Zealand, Cardrona is known for its natural snow and wide open slopes, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**

BEFORE *The Lord of the Rings* there was skiing. The South Island of New Zealand is more than a backdrop for a blockbuster. Come winter, it's a ski bunny's delight, the capital of which is Queenstown, gateway to four of New Zealand's premium ski fields.

It also is home to 120 drinking establishments in one square kilometre — now that's a lot of apres ski.

Queenstown has a population of 12,000 but a tourist turnover of 1 million visitors a year — and, it's easy to see why.

The town is dominated by the Southern Alps that rise from Lake Wakatipu. They are powerful seismic alpine peaks that, at only 15,000 years old, are considered young.

The dramatic landscape provides a playground for jet boating at high speeds through narrow gorges, jumping off bridges into aqua water with nothing but a rope tied to your feet, paragliding from mountain tops, rafting the rapids and throwing yourself down a powdered mountain with a couple of planks bound to each foot.

You could say it was altitude sickness but considering Queenstown is only 330m above sea level, despite its Alp surroundings, it's more likely the local Speight's Ale.

In case the minus zero temperatures, hordes of hitchhikers strapped to snowboards and goggle-tanned faces don't alert you, then the town's annual Winterfest will let you know when the ski season has begun.

Think 60 madcap events over 10 days for all budgets from \$NZ10 to see the Harlem Globetrotters of Ice Hockey, the Canadian Moose, to \$NZ135 for the Winterfest Gala Ball. If you're short on cash, check out the free events, of which there are plenty.

In a country that officially names its annual rabbit culling weekend "The Great Easter Bunny Hunt" it is no



SKI bunny's delight . . . a day skiing at Cardrona will leave you thinking you're a ski god or goddess.

surprise to witness monosyllabic farmers in gumboots race their working dogs down the black runs of Coronet Peak ski resort as part of Winterfest. The prize? Who cares, the event is sponsored by, who else, Speight's Ale and ends at the brew house. There's an official enclave of New Zealand celebrities attached to the festival. Called "Frunz of the Fustival" it is safe to assume they are either hobbits, elves or regulars on local soap *Shortland Street*. If you meet one, just nod your head politely and smile. It's all good fun and provides much people-watching from the restaurants and bars lining the maze of alleyways in town.

Then there are the ski fields. If you can combine your ski trip with Winterfest in July you're getting double the action for

half the price. Ski by day and fest up at night. It's best to hire wheels otherwise you'll be relying on your alarm to ensure you don't miss the bus transfers up the mountain each morning. The only accommodation on the ski fields is at Cardrona resort, and it's limited to 10 apartments, so forget Australian ski-in ski-out. Instead, it's a hairy access road to The Remarkables Range that will see you heading straight for a Jaegermeister upon arrival.

The Remarkables, known to locals as the Remarks, is one of four fields within driving distance of Queenstown.

Forty-five minutes from town and perched high in a north-facing mountain basin, skiers have all-day sun and access to 220ha of skiable terrain.

Like most New Zealand ski fields, the

runs aren't long — 1.5km on the Home-ward Bound back country run is the longest at Remarks but the lifts are fast so you won't be queuing for long.

The transitions from beginner through to advanced are quite steep but the jazz on the sundeck will soothe your aching muscles at lunch.

Coronet Peak, or the Peak if you're in the know, is the off-season home to the US downhill racing ski team who practise slalom on slopes with views to die for.

Thankfully they're professionals so they remain on their feet. We amateurs can take the time to marvel at the view of lakes and mountains as we cross our way over 110ha of groomed runs.

There are transitions from beginner through to advanced. The 2005 season celebrates the launch of a six-seater

express chair which opens up the mountain to brand-new terrain. Only 30 minutes from Queenstown, it's no problem if you sleep late. Cardrona ski resort is closer to Wanaka than Queenstown but well worth the hour's drive.

It has wide open runs with easy transitions from beginner to intermediate and advanced. A day on Cardrona will leave you thinking you're a ski god or goddess.

There are no snowmaking facilities so what you see is what you get — 320ha of fresh, natural snow. This is one of the only resorts that offers overnight accommodation on the mountain in New Zealand. It has 10 apartments.

The ski school for kids offers all-day entertainment and children's meals.

Treble Cone has a reputation. It's known for its challenging terrain with its

GETTING THERE

Queenstown Winterfestival (July 1 — July 10) tickets are on sale now and can be bought online at: www.winterfestival.co.nz

Where to stay:

Queenstown:

Mercure Grand St Moritz — winner of New Zealand Tourism awards four years running. www.accorhotels.co.nz

Wanaka:

Wanaka Homestead for boutique-style B & B and self-contained cottages starting from \$NZ245 for a king room with breakfast and complimentary daily wine and canapes. www.wanakahomestead.co.nz

How to get there:

Discount airline Pacific Blue flies direct to Christchurch from Brisbane daily for \$169 each way plus taxes if you book online. www.flypacificblue.com

Car hire from Christchurch is available from Budget.

www.budget.co.nz

Ski Deals:

Ski Express offers return flights to Christchurch ex-Brisbane, five days' car hire, three-day NZ ski lift pass for Coronet Peak and The Remarkable, five nights' accommodation at the Grand Mercure St Moritz in a deluxe twin room from \$1030 plus \$137 taxes. You can upgrade to a "ski n activity pass" for lift tickets to Treble Cone and Cardrona.

Deals are also available on direct flights to Queenstown International Airport. www.skiexpress.com.au

Rates at MG St Moritz during Winterfest (July 1-10) are: from \$NZ258 incl GST per room per night including bed and breakfast; from \$NZ204 including GST per room per night, room only.

Rates are for Deluxe Studio Suite, twin share.

700m vertical drop, almost twice that of others in the region. If you're an accomplished skier, Treble Cone will provide the challenges you are looking for.

There's more terrain, over 500ha, and the runs are longer too, with a 3.5km intermediate trail called Triple Treat with beginner access as well. Black run skiers can enjoy 4.5km on the new Upper High St trail.

About \$5 million has been spent opening up an extra 45ha of intermediate runs and a new express chairlift for the 2005 season. The views are spectacular and if you stay in Wanaka you won't have to drive over two hours to get there.

Stay at Wanaka Homestead with Roger and Shonagh for pure alpine charm, open fires and home-cooked meals to sustain you on the slopes.